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On Not Seeing the Forest

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On Not Seeing the Forest

Many of us share the common trait of taking the good things in life for granted. This tendency is reflected in the way in which we react to many great advances in medical science. For example, we now treat the most serious bacterial infections with antibiotics or sulfonamides and *expect* recovery, yet less than a half-century ago such infections were fatal. Not many years have passed since polio in youngsters and distemper in dogs were dreaded diseases, but today both are under good control. It is part of human nature to simply not "see the forest for the trees," and to accept great advances as our just due without any sense of appreciation for the years of dedicated work that made them possible.

Similarly, we who comprise the School of Veterinary Medicine community often appear to take for granted that we are one of the world's greatest veterinary schools. This attitude may result from a preoccupation with our own sphere of work to the extent that we do lose sight of the forest. Or, it may come from a lack of appreciation for how we achieved this prestigious position. In any event, a brief trip back into recent history may serve to establish a more realistic perspective.

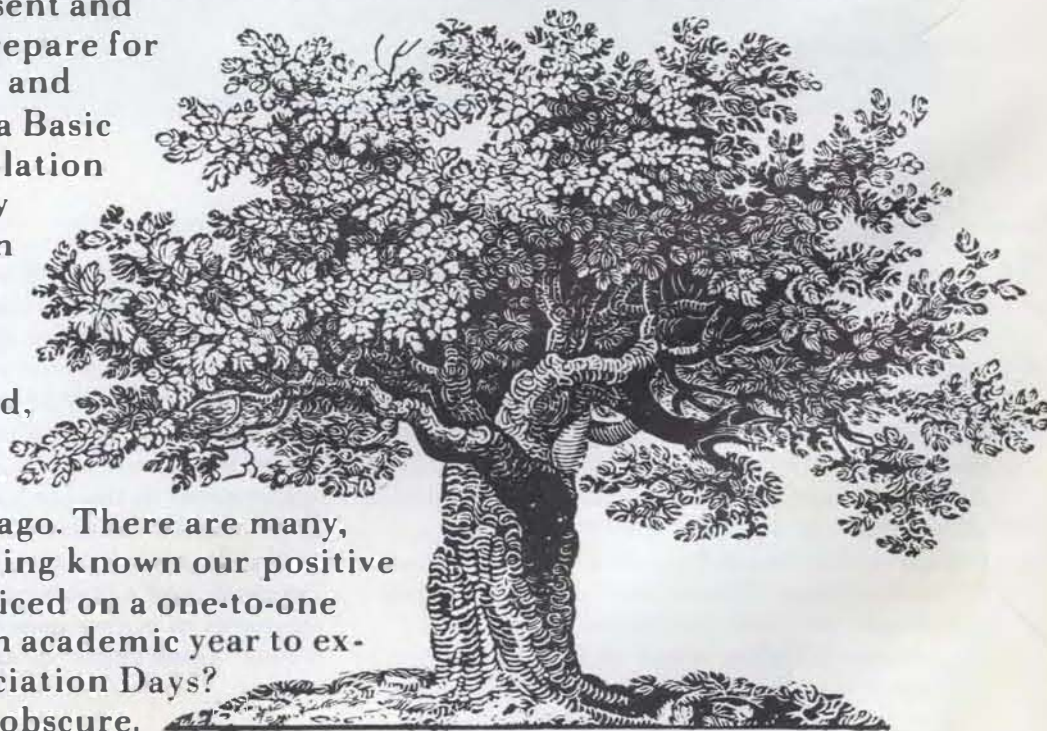
As late as 1953, there was serious question as to whether this school could, or should, survive. The new dean, Dr. Mark W. Allam, asked a small group of faculty to meet one evening at his home. The dean posed a bottom-line question: "Should we recommend to the trustees of the University that this school be phased-out?" There were a number of reasons for asking this shocking question. The physical plant was antiquated and in disrepair; operating funds were at poverty level and research funds were practically

non-existent; the faculty was small, undeveloped, and in-bred; our standing within the University was that of a "poor cousin"; and we had no base of support among agricultural groups, breeding associations, kennel clubs, or the state government. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that, at that time, we could have put all of our friends in a telephone booth!

After some discussion it was decided that rather than recommending a phasing-out process, we should vigorously attack our deficiencies, and develop a plan that would launch the school towards academic excellence. Considering the magnitude of the problems, that was a brave, and perhaps, unrealistic decision. However, under the energetic and imaginative leadership of Dean Allam, and his successor, Dean Robert Marshak, with the help of many individuals and groups, the next three decades became the golden years for the School of Veterinary Medicine. We literally rose from the ashes, and today, we have achieved a level of academic excellence.

Now we have a choice as to how to treat our reputation. We can rest on our laurels, or emulate the many who brought us to this prestigious position and meet the present and future challenges. If we are to maintain our place and prepare for the future it is important for us to develop new facilities and continue to strengthen our faculty. This means creating a Basic Science and Library building in Philadelphia, and an isolation unit, intensive care facility, and biomechanics laboratory at New Bolton Center. As important as these will be, such facilities will have little meaning unless we provide for new professorships and endowed chairs in several disciplines.

A major undertaking? Yes. And its success will depend, in part, on demonstrating an attitude of pride and appreciation for what we have today, combined with a resolve to continue the work started almost thirty years ago. There are many, many ways to show displeasure, but few avenues for making known our positive feelings, on an individual basis. Since this is rarely practiced on a one-to-one basis, perhaps we need to set aside one or more days each academic year to express our good feelings in a more formal fashion. Appreciation Days? We could do worse, and the forest would not be quite so obscure.



Dr. John Martin, VMD